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ABSTRACT

A course in English for academic purposes designed for graduate students needing specialized continuing development of their language skills is described. The course focuses on improving intelligibility, fluency, and accuracy of speech skills required in various disciplines in academic and professional contexts, and provides individualized instruction for different disciplines. Classroom techniques include pronunciation instruction, vocabulary development, pair and group practice, and oral presentations. Academic speech skills are divided into language functions such as expressing numbers, describing, classifying, defining, and talking about process. Public speaking is introduced halfway through the course. Classwork and homework are made relevant to the students by concentrating on common academic lexical phrases, academic vocabulary, and formal presentation style. Assignments are individualized for the students' own academic fields. Appended materials include a 20-item bibliography, an initial student questionnaire, a sample handout, a course evaluation form, and a list of strategies for increasing relevance in an oral language course for graduate students. (MSE)

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Increasing Relevancy in a Speaking Course for Graduate Students

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of

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Increasing Relevancy in a Speaking Course
for Graduate Students

I. Introduction

I'm going to be describing to you today a speaking course that we have developed primarily for graduate students at our university. Despite some initial misgivings on our part, this course has been very successful, if judged by student satisfaction and demand.

How course came to be

This course was developed because we realized that many graduate students on our campus wanted and needed continuing development of their English skills but were unable or unwilling to take courses through our intensive program. In designing it, we wanted to make sure the course would be perceived as relevant to graduate students' needs. Therefore, we created a program called English for Academics and Professionals and through it offered this course, which we called Academic Speaking I. We think these names do, in fact, help bring about the perception that the course will be relevant. The first time the course was offered there were about 75 names on the waiting list after two sections had filled, and there continue to be waiting lists.

We also wanted, of course, not only the perception but the reality that the course was relevant to each student. How we attempt to make it so and how we try to individualize instruction is the main topic of this presentation.

The students

But before we go any further, you might want to know more about our students. They are mostly graduate students, with an occasional staff or faculty member. Most have been in the country for some time. The majority are Asian, but we have many from the Middle East, Europe, and Latin American, as well. Most are in the sciences, medicine, engineering, and economics. I would classify their speaking proficiency levels as 2+ to 3+ on the FSI or Interlanguage Roundtable proficiency scale--high intermediate to quite advanced. As you can see, our students are quite a diverse group, and it was a challenge to design a course that would be useful to each one.

The focus of our presentation today is to show you how we attempt to make the course relevant to each student, no matter what discipline. But before we go into specific stragegies, let us give you an idea of the overall structure of the course.

II. Course Structure

We have three main objectives for Academic Speaking I: 1) to improve the intelligibility of students' spoken English, 2) to

increase their fluency and accuracy in academic speaking, and 3) to improve their public speaking skills. Classroom activities are varied and include pronunciation instruction, vocabulary development, pair and group practice, and oral presentations. Homework is required and is important. It includes studying handouts, listening to pronunciation tapes, recording exercises, and preparing for oral presentations. Grading is pass/fail, and the course confers no academic credit. However, we do give certificates, if desired, upon succesful completion of the course.

On our first day, we administer a taped pretest, and students fill out a questionnaire and give a brief self-evaluation of their speaking skills (see Appendix A). This questionnaire includes a kind of a "contract."

In the first three weeks, we do an overview of pronunciation from the pronunciation text that we use, Pronouncing American English, by Gertrude Orion. This overview includes sounds vs. spelling, the phonemic alphabet, the organs of articulations, and and introduction to rhythm, stress and inotnation. By the fourth week we are working on vowels and consonants. To supplement our pronunciation work, we occasionally use a video made by a speech pathology group, Perfect English Pronunciation, which is in your bibliography.

We study the language of academic speaking by dividing it into academic language functions, such as expressing numbers, describing, classifying, defining, talking about process, and so on. Work on functional language is spread throughout the 13 weeks.

About the fifth week, students are given an introduction to effective public speaking, and shortly after they give their first videotaped talks. Our students each give two or three presentations to be videotaped. We later review these videotapes individually with each student.

We have quizzes, a midterm, and a final exam.

A typical class

A typical class includes a review of the pronunciation homework; we'll correct the home assignments, answer questions, ask for demonstrations. Sometimes we have students do pairwork for stress and intonation practice or for focusing. We usually only spend from 10 to 20 minutes in class on pronunciation, but students have regular pronunciation homework assignments using borrowed Pronouncing American English tapes.

After pronunciation, we'll introduce, or review, the

academic language under study, using handouts or the overhead. We work on these language patterns, or "lexical phrases," (Nattinger, 1992) using the following sequence: 1) repetition, to focus on stress, rhythm, intonation; 2) controlled exercises, where we focus on accuracy; 3) less controlled activities in pairs or groups for fluency practice.

This has been a general description of the Academic Speaking course. Now we'll get into the specific strategies we use to try to make the course relevant to each and every student.

III. Making it relevant

Classwork

1. We believe that the functional academic language that we present and practice in class, the lexical phrases, are relevant for all disciplines, and our students agree. Here's how I usually teach these lexical phrases. First I usually introduce the structures on handouts as complete sentences, with content provided. We examine them and practice saying them with appropriate rhythm and intonation. Then I might put a transparency on the overhead giving the frames only and we practice the structures to express common knowledge. Finally, I ask students to use the structures with content from their own disciplines. Recently for example, my class has been working with the language of classification. After looking at handouts with full examples written out, I showed "frames" with the overhead (See Appendix B). Using these as guides, I solicited sentences using content from general knowledge. For example, in talking about differences between classes, one student said "Graduate students differ from undergraduate students in that they do not have much money." Then, to help students apply these structures to their own fields, I frequently ask them to make statements using content from their own disciplines. A graduate student in physics said, "Theoretical physicists differ from experimental physicists in that they do not do experiments."

2. Another way we try to make the classwork relevant is by choosing words for pronunciation practice that are common in academic speaking. When working on /l/, for example, I might use words subtechnical words such as analytical, problem, and illustrate. When working with suprasegmentals, I again use sentences developed with common subtechnical vocabulary. Sometimes I will use paragraphs from disciplines, like statistics, that use expressions common to many other disciplines.

3. For pair and group-work, I sometimes begin with a picture of something relevant to most graduate students--a science laboratory or an office, for example. These pictures then become the basis for various activities. The science lab picture was

used to practice description, for example, and I made a "Find the Differences" pair activity out of the office picture.

4. Also for pair or small-group work, I have students give each other mini-lessons about something in their fields. Recently, for example, I had them use the classification language we had been studying to tell their groups how some concepts or items in their field were classified. Here is a brief look at a Human Resources student using the language we have studied to talk about her field. (She is quite comprehensible, but uses difFER for DIFfer.) Notice how she is incorporating the language of classification. (VIDEOTAPE)

5. Finally, a very important part of our course is the formal oral presentations that the students make. I usually recommend that they pick a topic related to their field but that they explain it at a level that nonspecialists can understand. This way, words and phrases that are important to them can be practiced and, if need be, be corrected. As mentioned, these presentations are videotaped. They are critiqued by fellow students in class for presentation style. We'll show you a brief critique of a talk. (VIDEOTAPE) The individual critique is followed by a group discussion. Later the teachers meet individually with each student to review the videotapes and make suggestions and comments about the language.

Homework

The students work with two kinds of homework tapes. First are the tapes from the Orion text. We may cover 2 or 3 chapters a week. We do not try to cover the entire text; rather, we select sounds that we know are difficult for many speakers in the class. Then we assign particular chapters for students with particualr probems. For example, while everyone will work on the the th sounds, only a few may need to work on the /l/ and /n/ sound distinction.

The second kind of homework tapes are the "personal" tapes. These are tapes where students record themselves and hand the tapes in for us to review. We have many different assignments for these personal tapes, from controlled to quite free. The following is an example of a tape assignment that moves from a more controlled activity to freer ones:

1) The students were asked to read sentences from a chapter in the Orion text,
2) Since they had been describing shapes in class, they were asked to describe objects from a drawing of a science lab,
3) They were asked to describe three objects used in their work,
4) Finally, for fun, they were asked to describe the perfect job.

We collect the personal tapes, listen to them, jot down notes, and record our suggestions for improvement.

Another assignment that we have used successfully is based on one described by Ann Wennerstrom (1989). This assignment has students record a brief talk about something in their field (two or three minutes) and then listen and prepare a written transcript of their recording. After correcting the transcript, underlining words that are to be emphasized, and practicing difficult words, they record the talk once again. They are asked to listen to both versions and check their improvement. When the tape is handed in, we check it for errors; we may give (on the tape) a list of problem words or phrases to repeat. We make corrections on the transcript and then record it.

Miscellaneous

There are other ways we try to individualize our teaching that perhaps could be classified as "administrative."

First, in the free-speaking portion of the recorded pretest that we administer at the beginning of the semester, we ask students to talk about themselves, their fields, and their professional goals. In this way we learn about each student and demonstrate that we are aware of them as members of a particular discipline. We analyze the pretests, noting areas of strength and weakness for each student, and share the results.

At the end of the course, we give a posttest, similar to the pretest, so that we can compare results. In the free-speaking portion of the posttest, I usually have students tell me what they plan to do to continue improving their English speech.

Once the course is over, we write Student Performance Evaluations in which we comment on each student's areas of improvement and on areas where they still need to work. We also make suggestions for further steps they might take. They receive these evaluations about two weeks after the end of the course. Doing these evaluations is time consuming, but we feel it is important because it reinforces that we were concerned with each student's individual language development.

IV. Conclusion

Finally, we'd like to show you a typical summary of the course evaluations that students make of the course. (See Appendix C). We like to itemize the activities in our classes so that we get feedback if something is really not working. Generally, the feedback we get is extremely positive, as you can see. Almost always, among the highest-rated activities are the individual conferences with the teachers on the presentations and the personal homework tapes with teacher comments.

Janet Graham and Anna Picklo
Vanderbilt University
TESOL Convention, Baltimore
March 1994

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Academic Speaking

Questionnaire

Name_____ Status _____ Tel._____

Department_____ Advisor _____

Native language_____ Time in U.S._____

How did you learn about this class?

What do you hope to gain from this class? Please rank the following statements in order of their importance to you.

I want to...

___ 1. speak more fluently (with greater ease)

___ 2. speak more intelligibly, so that English-speakers understand me better

___ 3. speak more accurately, with better grammar and word choices

___ 4. speak in public with more confidence

___ 5. converse with English-speakers more confidently

___ 6. other (please explain)

How do you assess your own English speaking ability? What are your greatest strengths? Where do you need to improve?

During the fall semester, 1993, I am enrolled in _____ classes in addition to Academic Speaking I. I understand that I can expect to spend up to three hours per week (in addition to class time) for Academic Speaking I.

Signed_____

Differences Between Classes

I. 1. (clause), while (noun phrase) do not.

2. (clause), while (clause).

II. 1. (noun phrase) differ(s) from (noun phrase) in that ...

Grouping Items

(noun phrase)	are can may	be	classified categorized grouped

on the basis of according to	which... whether... how... (noun phrase)

Academic Speaking I

Course Evaluation
Spring 1993

Teacher: Janet Graham

In order to improve this class in the future, we are asking for your opinion regarding various features of this course. Please rate the following topics and activities according to their usefulness to you.

		not useful			very useful	$\bar{x}$
Language Functions						
1.	Saying numbers	1	2	3	4	3.7
2.	Describing	1	2	3	4	3.6
3.	Classifying	1	2	3	4	3.3
4.	Defining	1	2	3	4	3.8
5.	Verbalizing mathematics	1	2	3	4	3.3
6.	Explaining a process	1	2	3	4	3.7
7.	Explaining cause & effect	1	2	3	4	3.8
8.	Making logical assumptions	1	2	3	4	3.6
9.	Talking about conditions	1	2	3	4	3.8
Public Speaking						
10.	Making formal oral presentations (videotaped)	1	2	3	4	3.8
11.	Hearing evaluations of your talks by students	1	2	3	4	3.5
12.	Giving evaluation of other students' talks	1	2	3	4	3.5
13.	Making impromptu presentations	1	2	3	4	3.7
14.	Reviewing videotapes with the teacher	1	2	3	4	3.9

Pronunciation Activities					$\bar{x}$
15. In-class pronunciation work	1	2	3	4	3.7
16. Pronunciation homework using PAE text and tapes	1	2	3	4	3.7
17. Stress & Intonation tapes in the language lab	1	2	3	4	3.8
18. Recording homework tapes and receiving taped feedback from the teacher	1	2	3	4	3.8

19. In your own words, please tell me what the best thing about the course was?

20. Do you have any suggestions for improving the course?

21. What do you intend to do in the future to maintain and continue to improve your academic speaking?

THANK YOU. IT'S BEEN A PLEASURE WORKING WITH YOU.

Janet Graham and Anna Picklo
Vanderbilt University
TESOL Convention, Baltimore
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Some Strategies

A. Classwork

1. When studying academic language (e.g., the language of classification) ask students to use it with content from their own disciplines.

2. When reviewing vowel and consonant sounds, select "subtechnical" words for demonstration and practice (e.g., for /l/--analytical, problem, illustrate).

3. When working on suprasegmentals, use sentences with subtechnical vocabulary or paragraphs from disciplines with a widely used academic vocabulary (e.g., statistics).

4. For pair or small-group work, use pictures and games related to students' academic life (e.g., picture of an office--find the differences).

5. For pair or small-group work, have students give each other mini-lessons about something in their fields, using the academic language being studied.

6. For 8-10 minute oral presentations, have students talk about something in their field so that nonspecialists can understand. Videotape presentations for later individual review with the teacher.

B. Homework

1. Have students make audiotapes; make corrections and comments on each student's tape.

2. On the tapes, have students use the language specific to their fields by giving assignments such as 1) defining a concept from their field, 2) explaining a graph or table from their field, 3) reading a paragraph from a textbook in their field and then summarizing it.

C. Miscellaneous

1. During the first class, have students fill out a questionnaire giving personal information and

specifying their perceived needs.

2. In the pretest (audiotaped), have them talk about themselves and their fields.

3. Do an analysis of each student's performance on the recorded pretest and share them with the students.

4. In the posttest, have them tell you how they are going to continue to work on the English speech.

5. In the final Student Performance Evaluations, comment on each student's areas of improvement, and also on areas he or she needs to continue to work on. Make suggestions for further work.